

# Breaking the Deadlock in Sudan

by [Donald Booth \(/experts/donald-booth\)](/experts/donald-booth), [Areig Elhag \(/experts/areig-elhag\)](/experts/areig-elhag)

Jan 28, 2026

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Donald Booth \(/experts/donald-booth\)](/experts/donald-booth)

Amb. Donald Booth is a retired U.S. diplomat who served twice as Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, as well as Ambassador to Liberia, Zambia, and Ethiopia.



[Areig Elhag \(/experts/areig-elhag\)](/experts/areig-elhag)

Areig Elhag is the Arabic Content Editor at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. She has more than 15 years of experience in journalism and political analysis.



Brief Analysis

**Decisive U.S. leadership is essential to resolve worsening differences between fellow Quad members, neutralize spoilers, and ensure that Sudanese civilians—not just armed factions—shape their country’s future.**

Ending the conflict in Sudan will be exceedingly difficult, and for reasons beyond the country’s fractured political and military landscape. A new regional reality has emerged that cannot be ignored: the deep rift between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, two members of the diplomatic “Quad” established to help resolve the crisis alongside Egypt and the United States. Their disputes and competing interests in [Yemen \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-seismic-shift-has-consequences-beyond-its-borders\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-seismic-shift-has-consequences-beyond-its-borders), northeastern Africa (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypts-tightrope-walk-between-saudi-arabia-and-uae>), and elsewhere are undermining Washington’s ability to secure a ceasefire in Sudan and initiate the next phase of diplomacy needed to achieve a sustainable resolution.

## Differing Quad Priorities

Last year, the United States revived international mediation of the Sudan conflict through the Quad, [issuing \(https://www.state.gov/releases/2025/09/joint-statement-on-restoring-peace-and-security-in-sudan\)](https://www.state.gov/releases/2025/09/joint-statement-on-restoring-peace-and-security-in-sudan) a joint statement in September calling for a three-month humanitarian truce and a nine-month political transition. Yet implementation has been hamstrung by fundamental differences among Quad members, despite their apparent agreement on principles such as preventing Iran and its proxies from establishing a local presence.

For one, the UAE is signaling [zero tolerance \(https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-falcons-and-the-secretary-bird-\)](https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-falcons-and-the-secretary-bird-)

[arab-gulf-states-in-sudans-war/](#) for any Islamist role in governing Sudan, which it believes would harm Emirati interests there and result in further instability. Although Saudi Arabia and Egypt share this aversion, they believe Islamist political participation in a post-conflict government can be managed, and they have prioritized keeping the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in power. Riyadh is particularly concerned about securing its western frontier and minimizing the UAE's presence and influence in the Red Sea region. In addition, Cairo hopes to ensure sufficient water supplies from the Nile River and prevent the emergence of a fully democratic and civilian government in Sudan (which Egyptians might want to emulate at home). Yet Egyptian and Saudi officials have arguably undercut their own stability objectives by demanding that Sudan's existing state institutions be preserved—a framework that effectively means backing the SAF, which has never been able to deliver lasting peace.

## Achieving a Sustainable Solution

The notion that cutting off support for one side in the conflict so that the other can prevail is misguided and will not deliver peace and stability in Sudan. Instead, reaching a sustainable solution will require intensive U.S. engagement at the highest level. This engagement should proceed in three phases: (1) reconciling the competing interests of Quad partners; (2) bringing the leverage of a united Quad to bear on Sudan's other neighbors, who are still sustaining the combatants' ability to fight; and (3) convening a broad spectrum of Sudanese factions and figures to facilitate agreement on a political architecture that enables them to live in peace with each other.

**Reaching Quad consensus through direct engagement by President Trump.** Overcoming the differences between Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE requires understanding their respective spheres of influence in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. For example, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi both seek regional allies who can provide them with access to agricultural land, mines, ports, and military outposts. The United States should convince them that negotiating a division of these interests in Sudan would benefit them more than zero-sum competition there; indeed, their feud is resolvable because they share more common interests in the area than points of disagreement (e.g., containing Iranian and Turkish influence; securing the investments needed to transition away from being petrostates). Even the Islamist issue might be more amenable to resolution than it currently appears. SAF leader Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan recently [criticized \(https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/2/10/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/2/10/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A) Islamist militias and leaders; if the Quad offers him united support, he may be willing to cooperate in removing pro-Islamist officers from the SAF and disarming Islamist militias currently allied with his faction, thereby accommodating the UAE's red line while still meeting Egyptian and Saudi interests.

To change Cairo's hesitation about civilian governance in Sudan, Washington should reemphasize the proven fact that stability along Egypt's southern border cannot be achieved by backing an unpopular Sudanese military government that is incapable of fully defeating the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and uniting the country. This type of centralized control may be workable in Egypt, where the country's population is homogenous and concentrated along the Nile, but the diversity and dispersion of Sudan's population preclude that model. To be sure, offering full support to Burhan without pushing for widely inclusive transition efforts could result in an untenable military-Islamist form of governance reminiscent of the former Omar al-Bashir regime, so U.S. officials would need to tread carefully in this regard.

Egypt will have further incentive to compromise if Washington helps it address [concerns about the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam \(GERD\) \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/renaissance-dam-comes-online-us-mediation-role-needs-clarity\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/renaissance-dam-comes-online-us-mediation-role-needs-clarity) and Nile water access. The solution here should involve two elements:

1. **Negotiating an agreement on Sudan's Nile water usage now that the GERD has regularized the flow from the Blue Nile tributary, since the expansion of irrigated agriculture in Sudan poses the top threat to Egypt's water supplies.**

2. **Negotiating a GERD management agreement (perhaps with neutral third-party oversight) to ensure equitable tradeoffs between Egypt's water needs and Ethiopia's electricity needs, especially during extreme droughts.**

Achieving consensus on most or all of the above issues will likely require direct presidential engagement. In a November post on X, Senior White House advisor Massad Boulos [stated](https://x.com/US_SrAdvisorAF/status/1991257135200539110) ([https://x.com/US\\_SrAdvisorAF/status/1991257135200539110](https://x.com/US_SrAdvisorAF/status/1991257135200539110)), “As [President Trump] declared today, the United States is committed to ending the horrific conflict in Sudan,” noting that “we are working with our partners to facilitate a humanitarian truce and bring an end to external military support to the parties, which is fueling the violence.” Yet only the president himself can overcome the thus-far intractable issues that drive both unproductive Saudi-Emirati competition in the region and Egypt's security and water concerns. The most expeditious approach might be to convene Quad leaders for a Camp David-type summit, since only national leaders can muster the political will needed to make trade-offs on their perceived national interests.

**Securing support from neighbors.** Material support to the combatants mainly passes through Sudan's immediate neighbors, all of whom believe their national interests are best served by facilitating such transfers. A united Quad can change those calculations—the UAE has leverage in Ethiopia, Chad, and South Sudan, while Egypt can sway Eritrea and Libya (via Khalifa Haftar's faction). Other actors further afield may still try to fuel the conflict, but their ability to do so would be extremely limited without the support of these states.

Of course, getting Sudan's other neighbors on board will require further compromises between the differing local interests of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. It will also involve finding solutions to related regional disputes—for example, Ethiopia has longstanding disagreements with Egypt (over Nile water) and Eritrea (fueled by the status of Somaliland and Addis Ababa's quest for port access, both of which are [tied to Emirati interests](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/recognizing-somaliland-israels-return-red-sea) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/recognizing-somaliland-israels-return-red-sea>)).

**Engaging a broad spectrum of Sudanese factions to work toward lasting peace.** Any U.S.-led diplomatic initiative in Sudan should take into account both the actual status of territorial control and power on the ground and the expectations of the people—otherwise, this effort will fail to restore peace or preserve territorial integrity. Discerning the aspirations of Sudan's diverse population will be difficult because existing political institutions have lost public support. Hence, Washington and its partners will need to engage the country's diffuse set of armed actors, popular local figures (e.g., leaders of the Emergency Response Rooms and Neighborhood Resistance Committees), tribal leaders, and, perhaps, business leaders, each of whom should be challenged to figure out what peaceful, unified governance in Sudan looks like and how authorities can implement it.

The United States is in a very strong position to mediate such discussions. It is still viewed as the most neutral party in the Quad, and it has the resources and ability to exert pressure. With support from fellow Quad members, it could organize a meeting similar to the Dayton framework that helped achieve peace in the Balkans in the 1990s. This would involve the Trump administration bringing 60-80 participants to a secluded neutral location (possibly a military base) and keeping them there until they come up with a generally agreed framework for governing Sudan. Notably, U.S. or regional military assets may be needed to transport some participants to such a meeting.

## Conclusion

**D**ecisive U.S. leadership is essential to align regional actors, neutralize spoilers, and ensure that Sudanese civilians—not just armed factions—shape their country's future. Success would help end one of the world's worst humanitarian crises while denying space to extremists and U.S. rivals. Most important, taking the lead on Sudan would align the interests of America's major Gulf partners and advance broader U.S. strategic interests across the Middle East—from undermining Iran's increasingly brutal regime to expanding the Abraham Accords and keeping energy supplies safe from disruption by Yemen's Houthi movement.

Amb. Donald Booth is a retired U.S. diplomat who served twice as Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, as well as Ambassador to Liberia, Zambia, and Ethiopia. Areig Elhag is the Arabic content editor at The Washington Institute and former producer of the award-winning television program Between Two Niles. ❖

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Egypt's Tightrope Walk Between Saudi Arabia and the UAE](#)

Jan 23, 2026

◆  
Haisam Hassanein

(/policy-analysis/egypts-tightrope-walk-between-saudi-arabia-and-uae)



IN-DEPTH REPORTS

### [After Ukraine:](#)

*Prospects for a Russian Resurgence in the Middle East*

Jan 23, 2026

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya,  
Matt Tavares

(/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-prospects-russian-resurgence-middle-east)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Russia's New Middle East Strategy](#)

Jan 22, 2026



Anna Borshchevskaya,  
Matt Tavares

(/policy-analysis/russias-new-middle-east-strategy)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)